



GUIDANCE THROUGH DISTINCTION

UPON THE CLEAR PATH
OF THE SALAF US-SAALIH



SALAF
FOLLOWING THE SAVED WAY

Compiled by Abū Muhammad Yahyā

Guidance Through Distinction: Upon The Clear Path Of The Salaf Us-Saalih

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Author's Preface (Muqaddimah)

All praise is due to Allah alone, Lord of all that exists. I begin this humble work with the sincere intention to seek His pleasure alone, to serve His Book and the guidance of His Messenger ﷺ, to teach myself and my fellow believers, and to deepen my own understanding of His Revelation. I remind myself, before anyone else, that this writing is not for status, fame, nor recognition — but solely to seek His Face, His acceptance, and His forgiveness.

This reminder is for my own heart before it is for others, and I ask Allah to purify my intention from any hidden desires or worldly attachments, and to make every word a testimony for me and not against me on the Day when no soul will benefit except by what Allah has accepted from them.

Du‘ā:

O Allah, I ask You by Your Beautiful Names and Perfect Attributes to make this work sincerely for Your sake, and to accept it from me even with its shortcomings and deficiencies. Make it a means for me and those who read it to draw nearer to You, to reflect deeply upon Your Words, and to act upon what is contained therein.

O Allah, grant us beneficial knowledge, hearts that are humbled before You, and actions that are pure and righteous. Do not make this knowledge a proof against us, but rather a light in our graves, a companion in our loneliness, and a witness for us on the Day we meet You. Ameen.

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Introduction

The Purpose of Discussing Sects

The discussion of deviated sects is not a matter of intellectual curiosity or historical exploration. Rather, it is a subject of direct importance to the guidance, preservation, and salvation of the Muslim. The obligation to distinguish between the truth and falsehood — between the path of the Prophet ﷺ and the paths of innovation — is foundational in the religion.

This is rooted in the very name that Allāh gave His revelation:

﴿تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ الْفُرْقَانَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا﴾ “Blessed is He who sent down the Criterion (al-Furqān) upon His slave that he may be a warner to the worlds.” [Surah al-Furqān 25:1]

Ibn Jarīr at-Ṭabarī رحمه الله explained in his tafsīr of this verse: “al-Furqān: that by which He (Allāh) distinguishes between truth and falsehood, guidance and misguidance, disbelief and faith.” (Tafsīr Ṭabarī, 19/13)

The very purpose of revelation is distinction (Furqān) — to make clear the straight path and expose every opposing way.

The Prophet ﷺ warned explicitly about deviation and sectarianism not only as a possibility but as a definite future event. He said: “The Jews split into seventy-one sects, and the Christians split into seventy-two sects, and my Ummah will split into seventy-three sects. All of them are in the Fire except one.”

When asked who that one was, he ﷺ replied: “Whoever is upon what I and my Companions are upon today.” Reported by at-Tirmidhī (no. 2641), declared ḥasan by Ibn Taymiyyah in Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā (3/345), and authenticated by al-Albānī in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘ (no. 5343).

This ḥadīth is a decisive proof that deviation and sect formation are certain to occur, and that salvation lies in alignment with the guidance of the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions.

Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamān رضي الله عنه said: “The people used to ask the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ about good, and I used to ask him about evil, fearing that it might reach me...” Reported by al-Bukhārī (no. 3606) and Muslim (no. 1847).

This ḥadīth shows that knowing the paths of deviation is part of guidance, and that fear of falling into misguidance is an act of intelligence and religion, not divisiveness or harshness.

Imām Ibn al-Qayyim رحمه الله said: “Knowing evil is a condition for avoiding it. And whoever does not know evil will fall into it — either intentionally or by error.” (See: I’lām al-Muwaqqi’īn 2/157)

Why the Discussion of Sects Is a Matter of Saving Your Soul

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal رحمه الله said: “From the signs of the people of innovation is their revulsion against refuting the people of desires.” (Reported by al-Ājurri in ash-Sharī‘ah 1/242)

In fact, the Salaf used to identify the truth by way of its distinction from innovation. As ‘Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak رحمه الله said: “Isnād is from the religion. Were it not for the isnād, anyone could say whatever he wished.” Reported by Muslim in the Muqaddimah of his Sahih.

Unity Is Upon Truth, Not Inclusion of Falsehood

Allāh said:

﴿وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا﴾ “And hold fast all together to the rope of Allāh and do not divide.” [Āli ‘Imrān 3:103]

The command to unite is upon the Qur’an and Sunnah — how the Messenger of Allah ﷺ taught the Sahabah – this is the inheritance, not upon culture, politics, party slogans or personalities. Hence, distinction is a necessary prerequisite for unity — unity without Furqān is merely a coalition of confusion.

The purpose of discussing sects is not to spread hatred, rather, it is an act of ‘ibādah, rooted in the obligation to protect one’s īmān, preserve the Sunnah, and uphold the distinction between guidance and misguidance. The Qur’an calls itself the Furqān; the Prophet ﷺ warned against sects; the Companions feared deviation more than death; and the Salaf taught that truth is not recognized by men — men are recognized by the truth.

So long as division exists — and the Prophet ﷺ confirmed that it will — there must be those who expose it and call to the clear path.

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The Ḥadīth of Hudhayfah: The Callers to the Gates of Hell

The Context and Chain of the Ḥadīth:

The ḥadīth of Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamān رضى الله عنه is authentically reported in both Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (no. 3606) and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (no. 1847), with slight variation in wording. It is one of the foundational narrations in the field of fitnah, sectarian deviation, and the correct stance in times of disunity.

Text of the Ḥadīth:

Hudhayfah said: “The people used to ask the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ about good, but I used to ask him about evil for fear that it might reach me. So I said, ‘O Messenger of Allāh, we were in jāhiliyyah (ignorance) and evil, then Allāh brought us this good. Will there be any evil after this good?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘And will there be any good after that evil?’ He said, ‘Yes, but it will be tainted.’ I said, ‘What will taint it?’ He said, ‘A people who guide with other than my guidance, and you will approve of some of what they do and disapprove of some.’ I said, ‘Then will there be evil after that good?’ He said, ‘Yes, callers at the gates of Hell; whoever responds to their call, they will throw him into it.’ I said, ‘O Messenger of Allāh, describe them to us.’ He said, ‘They will be from our people and speak our language.’ I said, ‘What do you command me to do if that reaches me?’ He said, ‘Stick to the Jamā‘ah of the Muslims and their Imām.’ I said, ‘What if they have neither Jamā‘ah nor Imām?’ He said, ‘Then keep away from all those sects, even if you must bite onto the root of a tree until death reaches you while you are in that state.’” [Muslim no. 1847]

Key Benefits to Derive:

Fear of Deviation Is a Trait of the Intelligent Believer whose heart is alive. Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī رحمه الله commented: “Hudhayfah’s fear of falling into evil was due to his understanding of how quickly fitnah can spread, and that the one unaware of its signs may fall into it without knowing.” (See: Jāmi‘ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam, 2/343)

The Callers to Hell-Fire Are from Within The Ummah:

The Prophet ﷺ said: “They will be from our people and speak our language.”

Imām al-Nawawī رحمه الله explains in his commentary: “They will appear as Muslims, speak Arabic, and present themselves as people of concern for the Ummah, yet their guidance is not upon the Sunnah.” (Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 12/239)

Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله noted: “The people of innovation may resemble the people of knowledge and call others under Islamic slogans, but they lead to ruin.” (Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā 4/155)

The Command to Stick to the Jamā‘ah and the Imām:

The Prophet ﷺ said: “Stick to the Jamā‘ah of the Muslims and their Imām.”

Imām al-Barbahārī رحمه الله said: “The Jamā‘ah is Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamā‘ah, even if one man is upon it.” (Sharḥ al-Sunnah, point 160, with the explanation of Shaykh al-Fawzān)

Ibn al-Mubārak رحمه الله said: “According to me, the Jamā‘ah is Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. If the Jamā‘ah is lost, then cling to what the Jamā‘ah was upon before it was lost.” (Reported by al-Lālakā’ī in Sharḥ Uṣūl I‘tiqād Ahl al-Sunnah 1/65)

What If There Is No Clear Jamā‘ah or Imām?

The Prophet ﷺ’s advice was emphatic: “...then keep away from all those sects, even if you must bite onto the root of a tree until death reaches you while you are in that state.” This is a command for absolute distinction and complete avoidance of every sect and group that deviates from the Sunnah, even if one is isolated or without leadership.

Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله clarified: “Whoever is unable to find a Jamā‘ah upon the Sunnah is commanded to avoid the people of innovation and hold firmly to his dīn, even if alone.” (Minhāj as-Sunnah 5/132)

The Ḥadīth of the 73 Sects

The Text and Chains of Transmission

The ḥadīth of iftirāq (division) is among the most foundational narrations used by the scholars of the Salaf to define the boundaries of truth and falsehood, unity and division, and guidance and misguidance.

It is reported from multiple Companions, including:

- Abū Hurayrah رضى الله عنه in: – Sunan Abī Dāwūd (no. 4596) – Sunan at-Tirmidhī (no. 2641)
- ‘Awf ibn Mālik in: – Musnad Aḥmad (no. 16937)
- ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ in: – Sunan Ibn Mājah (no. 3992)

The ḥadīth has been authenticated by many scholars, including:

- Imām Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله – Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā (3/345)
- al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar رحمه الله – Fath al-Bārī (13/293)
- Shaykh al-Albānī رحمه الله – Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘ (no. 5343)

Wordings of the Ḥadīth

The Prophet ﷺ said: "The Jews split into seventy-one sects, and the Christians split into seventy-two sects, and my Ummah will split into seventy-three sects — all of them in the Fire except one." It was said, "Who is it, O Messenger of Allāh?" He replied: "That which I and my Companions are upon today." Reported in Sunan at-Tirmidhī (no. 2641), declared ḥasan.

This final clause — “mā ana ‘alayhi wa aṣḥābī” — is the decisive Criterion (al-Furqān).

Explanation from the Scholars

Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله: “This ḥadīth is authentic in meaning and has multiple chains of narration. It is used by the people of Sunnah to show that the Saved Sect is that which clings to the Sunnah and the Jamā‘ah — the path of the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions.” (Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā 3/345)

Imām al-Ājurī رحمه الله (d. 360H): “The clear, straight path is the Sunnah and the Jamā‘ah. Whoever deviates from this becomes a misguided innovator. And the Prophet ﷺ informed us that the Ummah will divide — only one will be saved: the one upon what he and his Companions were upon.” (ash-Sharī‘ah, 1/27)

Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān حفظه الله: “This ḥadīth clearly outlines that division is inevitable — and salvation is only for those who adhere to the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions. Anyone who contradicts this is from the 72 doomed sects.” (Sharḥ Lum‘at al-I‘tiqād)

The Qur‘ān Confirms This Furqān:

﴿وَإِنَّ هَذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ﴾

“And verily, this is My straight path, so follow it; and do not follow the other paths, for they will separate you from His path.” [Sūrah al-An‘ām 6:153]

Ibn Mas‘ūd رضي الله عنه said: “The Prophet ﷺ once drew a straight line and said: ‘This is Allāh’s path.’ Then he drew lines to the left and right and said: ‘These are paths; at the head of each is a shayṭān calling to it.’” Reported by Aḥmad (no. 4142), al-Dārimī (no. 210), with authentic chains.

What Are the Sects? Do They All Still Exist?

Shaykh Muḥammad Nāṣir ad-Dīn al-Albānī رحمه الله explained:

“The number (73) is literal and refers to actual sects that will appear, one after another, in this Ummah. At any time, not all may exist, but the description holds. The point is not counting — the point is warning.” (Silsilat al-Hudā wan-Nūr, Tape no. 49)

Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله affirmed similarly: “The number 73 does not mean every group exists at once. Some have vanished; others have emerged. But the one saved group remains, and it is characterized by adherence to the Prophet ﷺ and the Companions.” (Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā, 3/345)

The Use of the Term “Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamā‘ah”

The scholars used this title — Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamā‘ah — as a designation for the Saved Sect.

Imām Ibn Bāz رحمه الله said: “The one saved sect is Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jamā‘ah — they are upon the Sunnah and united upon the truth, even if they are few. Whoever opposes them is from the 72.” (Majmū‘ Fatāwā Ibn Bāz, 3/63)

This ḥadīth, through multiple authentic isnāds and the consensus of the Salaf, sets a clear and eternal Criterion: Salvation lies only in being upon what the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions were upon. All other paths — regardless of slogans, sincerity, or appearances — lead to misguidance and punishment.

This narration demands that every Muslim measure themselves and their affiliations not by lineage, popularity, or labels, but by the actual adherence to the way of the Prophet ﷺ and his noble Companions. Anything outside this is deviation, even if it is beautified by rhetoric.

It is this Furqān — this Criterion — that will now guide our analysis of the original sects that split from the straight path.

What Were the Original Sects in Islam?

The First Deviations from the Clear Path – Measured by the Criterion of the Sunnah

Foundation: Division Began During the Era of the Ṣaḥābah

The earliest sects in Islam appeared during the lifetime of the Companions رضي الله عنهم, and the Prophet ﷺ explicitly warned of their signs, roots, and ultimate fate. The Prophet ﷺ said: “Indeed, whoever among you lives long will see much differing. So upon you is my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the rightly guided Caliphs. Hold onto it with your molar teeth. Beware of newly invented matters, for every innovation is misguidance.” [Reported by Abū Dāwūd (no. 4607), at-Tirmidhī (no. 2676); authenticated by al-Albānī in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘ (no. 2546)]

This ḥadīth serves as the Furqān (Criterion): the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ and his Khulafā’ is the only safe reference point. Anything that deviates from it — regardless of its political cause, emotional ‘justification’, or historical background — is to be distinguished, exposed, and abandoned.

The First Emergent Sects: Categorized and Warned Against by the Salaf

The early Salaf explicitly named the first sects as they appeared and traced their deviation from the Jamā‘ah of the Companions. The four original groups that emerged first were:

Al-Khawārij (The Rebels)

Ar-Rāfiḍah (The Extremist Shī‘ah)

Al-Qadariyyah (The Deniers of Qadar)

Al-Mu‘tazilah (The Rationalists)